Gibraltar lies at the southern tip of the dominantly Spanish-speaking Iberian Peninsula and a few miles across from Arabic-speaking North Africa. But this remnant of the British Empire speaks English, and makes it a point to do so, evincing the diffusion of Anglophones near and far. I ran into this loud demonstration by Moroccans objecting to their treatment by the British and Gibraltar governments, but when I went over to talk to the fellows in charge of this display, I found that we could only communicate in French—they spoke none of the English on these posters. Who wrote all this stuff? They told me that they had hired several locals to translate and print their opinions. When the newspaper people come to photograph all this, they said, the world should be able to read it, and to reach the world you have to say it in English.”
The world today is a Babel of languages, a patchwork of tongues. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify some languages that are related, such as Spanish and Portuguese, which are so similar that their common origin and recent divergence are beyond doubt. In fact, there is a historical record of this process. It reveals how the Latin of Roman times gave rise to the Romance languages of today (the major ones being Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, French, and Romanian). In just a few centuries Latin, which had been spoken in territories extending from Britain to the Bosporus, was replaced by a set of derivative languages.

Given the speed and thoroughness of this process, can we hope to unlock the mysteries of much earlier languages and retrace the evolution of modern languages from what linguists call the Mother Tongue, the first language spoken by Homo sapiens sapiens perhaps as long as 200,000 years ago? That remains an elusive goal, but with the help of computers, remarkable progress is being made in the reconstruction of ancient languages and their paths of diffusion. This chapter focuses on the relevance of linguistic theory and research to historical geography.

**KEY POINTS**

- The search for the origins of language goes back tens of thousands of years. It has yielded information not only about how language changes but also about the environments where early languages were spoken.
- Geolinguistic scholars group languages into different families based on similarities in structure and vocabulary. Some believe that major language families evolved out of distinct agricultural hearths, but this is a contested theory.
- Languages change through divergence, convergence, and replacement, making the spatial search for origins problematic.
- The number of language families in the Western Hemisphere is much greater than in the Eastern Hemisphere despite the relative recency of human migration in the Americas. This apparent anomaly is not well understood.
- Writing, technology, and political organization play a key role in the diffusion of individual languages.
- Indo-European languages were spread throughout much of the world during the European colonial period.

**TRACING LINGUISTIC DIVERSIFICATION**

The diversification of languages has long been charted through analysis of sound shifts. Take the Latin word for milk (*lacte*) and note that it becomes *latta* in Italian, *leche* in Spanish, and *lait* in French. Or the Latin for the number eight (*octo*), which becomes *otto*, *ocho*, and *huit*, respectively. Even if the Latin roots for these words had never been known, linguists would have been able to deduce them.

This technique of backward reconstruction is crucial to linguistic research. If it is possible to deduce a large part of the vocabulary of an extinct language, it may be feasible to go even further and re-create the language that preceded it. This technique, called deep reconstruction, has yielded some important results. It takes humanity’s linguistic family tree back thousands of years.

More than two centuries ago William Jones, an Englishman living in South Asia, undertook a study of Sanskrit, the language in which ancient Indian religious and literary texts were written. Jones discovered that the vocabulary and grammatical forms of Sanskrit bore a striking resemblance to the ancient Greek and Latin he had learned while in college. “No philologer [student of literature] could examine all three,” Jones wrote, “without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists.” In

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the late eighteenth century this was a revolutionary notion indeed.

During the nineteenth century Jacob Grimm, a scholar as well as a writer of fairy tales, suggested that sound shifts might prove the relationships between languages in a scientific manner. He pointed out that related languages have similar, but not identical, consonants. He believed that these consonants would change over time in a predictable way. Hard consonants, such as the v and d in the German word vater, would soften into va and de (Dutch) and vather (English). Looking backward, we should expect to find the opposite: a hardening of consonants.

From Jones’s notions and Grimm’s ideas came the first major linguistic hypothesis, which proposed the existence of an ancestral (Proto) Indo-European language (or closely related languages), the predecessor of Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit, among other ancient languages. This concept had major implications because the proposed ancestral language(s) would link not only the present and past Romance language but also a number of other languages spoken from Britain to North Africa and South Asia.

Several research tasks followed from this hypothesis. First, the vocabulary of the proposed ancestral language must be reconstructed. Second, the hearth or source where this language originated, and from which it spread, must be located. Third, the routes of diffusion by which this dispersal took place should be traced. And fourth, researchers should attempt to learn about the ways of life of those who spoke this language.

THE LANGUAGE TREE

Proto-Indo-European gave rise to more than Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit. As Figure 8-2 reminds us, the Indo-European language realm includes not only languages derived from Latin but also the Slavonic (Slavic) languages, including Russian, Ukrainian, Polish, Czech, Slovak, Bulgarian, and Slovenian, and the Germanic languages, including German, Swedish, Danish, and Norwegian. These, too, must have had common ancestors, branches of the Proto-Indo-European “tree.”

Divergence

The first scholar to compare the world’s language families to the branches of a tree was August Schleicher, a German linguist. In the mid-nineteenth century he suggested that the basic process of language formation is language divergence, that is, differentiation over time and space. Languages would branch into dialects; isolation would then increase the differences between dialects. Over time, dialects would become discrete languages, as happened with Spanish and Portuguese and is now happening with Quebec–Quebec French. Although aspects of this idea were later challenged, it essentially stood the test of time, and the language-tree model remains central to language research (Fig. 9-1).

Convergence

A complicating factor, however, is human mobility. While languages diverged, people migrated as well. Languages did not merely diffuse through static populations; they were also spread by relocation diffusion (see Chapter 2). Sometimes such diffusion caused long-isolated languages to make contact, fostering language convergence. Such instances create special problems for researchers because the rules of reconstruction may not apply or may be unreliable.

Recreation

A further complication should be considered in view of modern cultural events. We know that the languages of traditional, numerically smaller, and technologically less advanced peoples have been replaced, or greatly modified, by the languages of invaders. This process of language replacement goes on today, and there is every reason to believe that it has happened ever since humans began to use language. (In the next chapter we discuss the process of creolization, a form of language replacement now occurring in the Caribbean region and elsewhere.)

Reconstructing even a small branch of the language tree, therefore, is a complicated task. Look again at the language map of Europe (Fig. 8-3). If only all the languages were members of the same family, the same branch of the tree! But things are not that simple. Hungarian, completely surrounded by Indo-European languages, is not in the same family as any of its neighbors. Finnish is another non-Indo-European language and apparently is distantly related to Hungarian but mapped as a member of a discrete subfamily. Estonian is more closely related to Finnish, as the map suggests. But a tantalizing enigma is presented by Basque; a language belonging to a distinct language family that is now isolated in a small region of northern Spain and southwestern France. What ancient proto-language gave rise to Basque? Similar questions arise in hundreds of places throughout the world, where linguistic islands survive despite later waves of language diffusion.

THEORIES OF LANGUAGE DIFFUSION

Although linguists reconstructed Proto-Indo-European vocabulary, human geographers and other scholars searched for the source of Proto-Indo-European. Identifying this hearth would enormously increase their understanding of Eurasian historical geography.

The linguists’ research produced many valuable clues. Reconstructions by scholars working independently...
CHAPTER 9 The Diffusion of Languages

INDO-EUROPEAN BRANCHES OF THE LANGUAGE TREE

often produced remarkably similar results. The proto-language(s) had words for certain landforms, trees, and other features of the natural landscape, but it lacked others. Such information helps reveal the environment in which a language may have developed. For example, if a reconstructed language has no word for snow, this suggests a tropical or equatorial origin. If there is no word for palm tree, the language is likely to have emerged in a cold region. More specifically, if a certain type of vegetation (oak, pine, beech, birch, tall or short grass) is part of the vocabulary, the search for the environment where the language developed can be narrowed down—although researchers must factor in a time dimension, as environments have changed even during the Holocene. Time is less an issue when vocabulary refers to physiographic features of the landscape. If there are many words for mountains and hills but few for flat land, we can conclude that the source area was mountainous.

Conquest Theory

Analyses of this kind produced a tentative answer to the geographic question. The Proto-Indo-European homeland source, it seemed, lay somewhere north of the Black Sea in the vast steppes of present-day Ukraine and Russia. The time, it was suggested, was more than 5000 years ago, and judging from the reconstructed vocabulary, the people used horses, had developed the wheel, and traded widely in many goods. The logical conclusion seemed to be that these early speakers of Proto-Indo-European spread westward on horseback, overpowering earlier inhabitants and beginning the diffusion and differentiation of Indo-European tongues.

This *conquest theory* of language dispersal in Europe west of the Russian plains was long supported by a majority of archeologists, linguists, and human geographers. The sound shifts in the derivative languages (*vater* to *vader* to *father*, for example) seemed to represent a long period of westward divergence. The location of older Indo-European languages on western margins (Breton in France, Scottish Gaelic and Welsh in Britain, and Irish Gaelic in Ireland) appeared to be due to the arrival of newer languages from the east.

Agriculture Theory

But not all scholars were convinced. As the archeological record in Europe became better known, other hypotheses were proposed. Luca Cavalli-Sforza and Robert Ammerman suggested that it was the spread of agriculture, not conquest, that diffused the Proto-Indo-European language through Europe. This, of course, meant that the source area of the ancient language would have had to lie in an area of agricultural innovation, not in the Ukrainian-Russian grasslands where pastoralism was the prevailing way of life. But where was this hearth? Was it in the Fertile Crescent of the Middle East? Apparently not, because the vocabulary of Proto-Indo-European has few words...
for plains but many terms for high and low mountains, valleys, mountain streams, rapids, lakes, and other high-relief landforms.

In 1984 the Soviet scholars Thomas Gamkrelidze and Victor Ivanov, who reconstructed much of the known vocabulary of Proto-Indo-European, published a book in which they reported that these terms were supplemented by words for trees such as mountain oak, pine, fir, willow, and ash. The language also had names for animals such as lions, leopards, and monkeys—none of which lived in the plains north of the Black Sea. Thus arose the agriculture theory (as opposed to the conquest theory) and its proposed source area: the mountainous, well-watered terrain of Anatolia in modern Turkey. The archaeological record indicates that there, between 7000 and 9000 years ago, the horse had been domesticated and the wheel was in use. The realm’s leading hearth of agricultural innovation lay in nearby Mesopotamia.

Support for the Theory In 1991 the agriculture theory received support from analyses of the protein (that is, gene) content of individuals from several thousand locations across Europe. This research confirmed the presence of distance decay in the geographic pattern: certain genes became steadily less common from southern Turkey across the Balkans and into Western and northern Europe. This pattern was interpreted as showing that the farming peoples of Anatolia moved steadily westward and northward. As they did so, they mixed with nonfarming peoples, diluting their genetic identity as the distance from their source area increased. Archeologists Robert Sokal, Neal Olden, and Chester Wilson argued that farming led to an unprecedented increase in population and that this in turn stimulated migration. As a result, a slow but steady wave of farmers dispersed into Europe.

The agriculture theory can be used to explain a number of features of the language map of Europe. Ammerman and Cavalli-Sforza proposed that for every generation (25 years) the agricultural frontier moved approximately 18 kilometers (11 miles). This would mean that the European frontier would have been completely penetrated by farmers in about 1500 years, which is close to what the archaeological record suggests. But some of the nonfarming societies in their path held out, and their languages did not change. Thus Etruscan did not become extinct until Roman times, and Basque survives to this day as a direct link to Europe’s pre-farming era.

Drawbacks of the Theory The agriculture theory has some drawbacks, however. The Anatolian region is not an ideal environment for farming, and there is no strong archeological evidence for an agricultural culture hearth there. In addition, despite the genetic gradient identified in Europe, some language geographers continued to prefer the dispersal hypothesis, which holds that the Indo-European languages that arose from the proto-language(s) were first carried eastward into Southwest Asia, next around the Caspian Sea, and then across the Russian-Ukrainian plains and on into the Balkans (Fig. 9-2). As is so often the case, there may be some truth in both hypotheses. If Anatolia were the source, the diffusion of Indo-European languages (that is, dialects of Proto-Indo-European) could have spread both westward across southern Europe and in the broad arc shown in Figure 9-3.

Figure 9-3 Indo-European: Proposed Westward Dispersal. Approximate timings and routes for the westward dispersal of the Indo-European languages.
In any case, an eastward diffusion must have occurred in view of the relationships between Sanskrit and Ancient Latin and Greek described by William Jones.

The geographic story of Proto-Indo-European is still unfolding, but this has not deterred researchers from going back even further. What was the ancestral language for Proto-Indo-European?

◆ THE SEARCH FOR A SUPERFAMILY

The evolution and diffusion of Proto-Indo-European occurred over a period of, at most, 9000 years. But language development and divergence have been going on for 10 times as long or more; we have just dissected a thin branch of an old, gnarled tree (Fig. 9-4).

This does not discourage modern linguists or language geographers, however. The British scholar Colin Renfrew carried the agriculture theory a step further by proposing that not just one but three agricultural hearths gave rise to language families (Fig. 9-5). From the Anatolian source diffused Europe’s Indo-European languages; from the western arc of the Fertile Crescent came the languages of North Africa and Arabia; and from the Fertile Crescent’s eastern arc ancient languages spread into present-day Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India, later to be replaced by Indo-European languages.

Russian scholars have long been in the forefront of research on ancient languages, but their work was not well known in the West until recently. The work of two scholars in particular has had great impact. Starting in the 1960s, Vladislav Illich-Svitych and Aharon Dolgopolsky tackled a daunting problem: deep reconstruction of the language that was ancestral to Proto-Indo-European. Using words that are assumed to be the most stable and dependable parts of a language’s vocabulary (such as those identifying arms, legs, feet, hands, and other body parts, among others), the two scholars and their followers have worked to uncover the prehistoric relatives of all living languages.

Figure 9-4: Schematic Diagram of Language Sources. Source: After a diagram in Philip E. Ross, “Hard Words,” Scientific American, April 1991, p. 139.
parts, and terms for the Sun, Moon, and other elements of the natural environment), they reconstructed an inventory of several hundred words. What was most remarkable is that they did this independently, each unaware of the other’s work for many years. When they finally met and compared their inventories, they found that they were amazingly similar. They agreed that they had established the core of a pre-Proto-Indo-European language, which they named Nostratic.

As with Proto-Indo-European, the evolving vocabulary of the Nostratic language revealed much about the lives and environments of its speakers. There apparently were no names for domesticated plants or animals, so Nostratic-speakers were hunter-gatherers, not farmers. An especially interesting conclusion had to do with the words for dog and wolf, which turned out to be the same, suggesting that the domestication of wolves may have been occurring at the time. The oldest known bones of dogs excavated at archaeological sites date from about 14,000 years ago, so Nostratic may have been in use at about that time, well before the First Agricultural Revolution.

Nostratic is believed to be the ancestral language not only of Proto-Indo-European, and thus the Indo-European language family as a whole, but also of the Kartvelian languages of the southern Caucasus region (16 in Fig. 8-2), the Uralic-Altaic languages (which include Hungarian and Finnish, Turkish and Mongolian), the Dravidian languages of India (Fig. 8-5), and the Afro-Asiatic language family, in which Arabic is dominant.

How long before 14,000 years B.P. (Before the Present) it may have been in use has not yet been established. The same is true of Nostratic’s geography. Where Nostratic was born, and what tongues gave rise to it, are unanswered questions. However, Nostratic links languages that are separated even more widely than those of the Indo-European family today. Some scholars have suggested that Nostratic (and its contemporaries, variously named Eurasian, Indo-Pacific, Amerind, and Austro) is a direct successor of a proto-world language that goes back to the dawn of human history, but this notion is highly speculative. The inset in Figure 9-1 reminds us how little of the human language tree we know with any certainty.

◆ DIFFUSION TO THE PACIFIC AND THE AMERICAS

The final stages of the dispersal of the older languages—before the global diffusion of English and other Indo-European languages—occurred in the Pacific realm and in the Americas. One would assume that the historical geography of these events would be easier to reconstruct than the complex situation in western Eurasia. After all, the peoples who canoed across the Pacific brought their languages to unpopulated islands. Similarly, there was no linguistic convergence with preexisting languages in the Americas. Therefore, if we needed a testing ground for linguistic divergence without “noise,” the Pacific islands and the Americas would seem to be fine natural laboratories. But when we examine the debates over Pacific and American native languages, we find that the problems involved are not simple at all.

Pacific Diffusion

In our discussion of human dispersal, we noted how late people first arrived in the Pacific islands; Polynesians reached New Zealand little more than 1000 years ago. On the other hand, Australia was reached between 50,000 and 60,000 years ago, and New Guinea’s first human population must have arrived even earlier because the route to the southern landmass passed through it. Papuans as well as Native Australians were hunter-gatherers, although there is archaeological evidence that root-crop cultivation began in New Guinea as long as 6000 years ago, leading to population growth and the expansion of Papuan populations eastward into the
Solomon Islands and westward into present-day Indonesia. This expansion brought farmers into contact with foragers, and as a result the language mosaic of New Guinea and nearby islands is extremely complex.

Yet the diffusion of peoples and their languages into the Pacific north of Indonesia and New Guinea did not begin from these areas. Instead, it began in coastal China, where farming was well established. The languages of China and Southeast Asia had undergone several transitions; the sequence probably was similar to that from the pre-farmers’ Nostratic to the farmers’ Proto-Indo-European. An ancestral language gave rise to the Austro-Tai family of languages, and out of this family arose Austronesian. Language geographers believe that speakers of this language (with many words for rice, field, farm, water buffalo, plow, and canoe) reached Taiwan about 6000 years ago. Several centuries later, Austronesian speakers managed to reach the Philippines. This movement resulted in the division of Austronesian into two dialects that later developed into major subfamilies. One of these, Malayo-Polynesian, became the forerunner of a large number of languages, including those spoken by the first settlers of Madagascar, the islands of Melanesia and Micronesia, Fiji (where Fijian was a discrete Malayo-Polynesian offshoot), and New Zealand, whose Maori people speak Polynesian, another derivative of this branch.

Considering the water-fragmented nature of the Pacific realm, this process of diffusion took place remarkably quickly. We may wonder why it took so long for the Agricultural Revolution in East Asia to stimulate emigration onto the islands off Asia’s coast; but then the migrants rapidly spread from Madagascar in the west to Easter Island in the east. The whole eastern region of Polynesia was settled within several centuries (Fig. 9-6).

Although the lineages of Austronesian languages are better understood today, much remains to be learned about the reasons behind the complexity of the Pacific language map. Did successive waves of invasion stimulate divergence among the Malayo-Polynesian languages? Or was differentiation due to isolation? And there remains the question of Austronesian ancestries. Linguists do not have a model similar to Nostratic for the languages of the Asian mainland. Thus the Pacific language arena is anything but simple.

Diffusion in the Americas
As Figure 8-2 indicates, the current language map of the Americas is dominated by Indo-European languages.

Figure 9-6 Stages in the Austronesian Expansion. Bellwood’s Pacific realm model shows the stages in the expansion of Austronesian languages. Source: Adapted from P. Bellwood, “The Austronesian Dispersal and the Origin of Languages,” Scientific American, 1991, p. 88.
These have engulfed the languages spoken in America for thousands of years—the languages of Native Americans. The Native American population never was very large by modern standards. Estimates of its pre-Columbian population have increased over the years as anthropologists have learned more about these peoples, but even the highest estimate puts the number of Native Americans at 40 million just before the European invasion. As noted previously, it was long believed that the Native Americans arrived via the Bering land bridge from Asia and that the earliest immigrations occurred just 12,000 to 13,000 years ago. Given the modest numbers of people involved and their recent arrival, one would assume under this scenario that the linguistic situation should be fairly simple. There were no preexisting peoples to be absorbed and no lifeways to be transformed. At the very least, the pattern should be much simpler than that of Eurasia.

These conclusions may be wrong, however. While some 40 language families have been recognized in the Old World, linguists have identified as many as 200 Native American language families, each different from the others. It thus appears that the first American languages diverged into the most intricately divided branch of the human language tree—within a very brief period if one accepts the Bering land bridge hypothesis.

The Greenberg Hypothesis
Or did they? Not all linguists agree. In Language in the Americas (1987), Joseph Greenberg proposed that there are three families of indigenous American languages, each corresponding to a major wave of migration into the Western Hemisphere (Fig. 9-7). The oldest, largest, and most widely distributed family is the Amerind superfamily, which is spread from the shores of Hudson Bay to the coast of Tierra del Fuego. The next oldest, next largest, but much less widely diffused family is the Na-Dene, which encompasses languages spoken by Native Americans of northwest Canada and part of Alaska as well as by the Apache and Navajo (the outlier in the southwestern United States shown in Figure 9-7). Last to arrive in North America were speakers of the Eskimo-Aleut family of languages, who are still concentrated along Arctic and near-Arctic shores.

Critics of Greenberg’s hypothesis contended that Greenberg did not follow proper procedures of reconstruction. Rather than studying sound shifts and other details, he compared similar-sounding words in contemporary languages. Similar work in Africa produced the map shown in Figure 8-5, which also came under heavy fire when it was first published. Today, however, that map is widely accepted.

The implications of Greenberg’s hypothesis are far-reaching. If the Amerind languages are indeed members of the same family, their divergence must have occurred during a period of more than the 12,000 to 13,000 years allowed for by the dating of the first immigration. That would require a revision of the long-held view of the peopling of the Americas.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, new archeological data gave support to such a revision. A rock shelter in Pennsylvania produced artifacts dated at about 16,000 years B.P., and a site in Chile yielded material tentatively dated at 53,000 B.P. If the latter date can be confirmed, the first wave of migrants may have crossed the Pacific more than 40,000 years ago. Crucial evidence may come to light in the next several years, but at the moment the archeological evidence for very early American immigration is still tentative.

Stronger support has come from other directions. For many years Christy Turner studied dental variation among Native Americans. On the basis of dental data he concluded that the Americas were peopled in three waves of immigration that occurred over a longer period than 12,000 years. Genetic studies are also producing results consistent with the Greenberg hypothesis: the Native American speakers appear to belong to one large group whose languages have diverged over a lengthy period.

The Continuing Controversy
A majority of linguists still doubt the three-wave hypothesis and the three-family
map of American languages. They believe that the ultimate family relationships will eventually become clear from careful reconstruction of individual languages. They also believe that drawing conclusions from the data Greenberg used is inappropriate and misleading.

Genetic research and archeological studies will ultimately resolve the issue. In the meantime we are reminded of the gaps still remaining in our knowledge—not just of the early development of humanity and its acquisition of language but even of its most recent pre-colonial migrations. The modern map of languages conceals a complex and fascinating past whose unraveling will help tell us not only where we were but also why we are the way we are.

◆ INFLUENCES ON INDIVIDUAL LANGUAGES

Each of the languages in the world’s language families has its own story of origin and dispersal. We cannot hope to tell the story of even a fraction of these languages here, but we can identify some of the critical influences on the diffusion of individual tongues. First, it is clear that speakers of nonwritten languages will not retain the same language very long if they lose contact with one another. This is what led to the proliferation of languages before the advent of writing. By the same logic, the diffusion of a single tongue over a large area occurs only when people remain in contact with one another and continue to rely on a common linguistic frame of reference.

Beyond opportunities for contact, the changing character of the world’s linguistic mosaic has been influenced by three fundamental forces: literacy, technology, and political organization. Literacy is critical because texts are the primary means by which language can become stabilized. Technology is important because it influences both the production of written texts and the interaction of distant peoples. Political organization is key because it affects both what people have access to and which areas are in close contact with one another.

With these influences in mind, we can begin to see how the global linguistic pattern has changed over the past several millennia. Just a few thousand years ago most habitable parts of the Earth’s surface were characterized by a tremendous diversity of languages—much as one finds in interior New Guinea today. There were no literate societies and no means of bringing together peoples who were separated even by short distances. With the rise of larger-scale, more technologically sophisticated literate societies, some languages began to spread over larger areas. By 2000 years ago certain languages (notably Chinese and Latin) had successfully diffused over entire subcontinents. This was possible because these languages were associated with political systems that knit together large swaths of territory—although it should be noted that the dominant languages often coexisted with local languages, leading to regional differences within imperial realms. Not surprisingly, then, when large-scale political systems disintegrated—as happened in the case of the Roman Empire—linguistic divergence took place.

Given the importance of literacy, technology, and politics for the diffusion of languages, two developments in the late Middle Ages were of particular importance to the emergence of the modern language pattern: the invention of the printing press and the rise of nation-states. The printing press was invented in Germany in 1450, and during the next hundred years it spread to other parts of Europe and beyond. The printing press allowed for an unprecedented production of written texts. Many of the early printed texts were religious, and these helped determine the standard form of various languages. The Luther Bible played this role for German, as did the King James Bible for English.

The rise of nation-states was equally important, for these political entities had a strong interest in promoting a common culture, and in some cases they asserted their interests in Flanders places as well. Political elites
brought peoples together and played a key role in distributing printed texts. Moreover, as the leaders of countries such as England and Spain sought to expand their influence overseas, they established networks of communication and interaction that brought distant areas into closer contact than would have been conceivable just a few centuries earlier. In the process, certain languages came to be spread over vast portions of the Earth’s surface.

As interesting as the historical geography of language is, the problems of language in the modern world are many and urgent. Language is a powerful component of ethnicity and lies at the heart of many current conflicts. It can be a barrier to advancement, a source of misunderstanding, and a divisive force. Governments manipulate language to bridge cultural and ethnic chasms; traders modify it to facilitate business. We consider these matters in the next chapter.

◆ KEY TERMS ◆

agriculture theory  
Amerind  
Austronesian  
conquest theory  
deep reconstruction  
Eskimo-Aleut  
Fijian  
language convergence  
language divergence  
language replacement  
Malayo-Polynesian  
Na-Dene  
Nostratic  
Polynesian  
(Proto-)Indo-European language  
sound shifts

◆ APPLYING GEOGRAPHIC KNOWLEDGE ◆

1. Language divergence involves the differentiation of languages over time and space. Where in North America is language divergence in progress today? What geographic factors contribute to this process here and elsewhere in the world?

2. After perhaps as many as 200,000 years of diffusion, the final phase of language dispersal (before the modern colonial period) occurred in the Americas and the Pacific. Explain how the distribution and content of indigenous languages in the Americas are analyzed to help in the reconstruction of the human settlement of this last frontier. Archeological and linguistic evidence are not always in agreement—why?